Animal Science

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Safety Considerations In Working With Cattle

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There are many reasons cattle react the way they do when trying to get them up at cattle working time. Many of their reactions are a result of their innate characteristics. Understanding these characteristics and how animals respond to different situations can make cattle handling a safe and less stressful event. Decreasing stress and excitability to both the cattle and cattle handler will contribute to the improvement of safety to both parties at this event. Many accidents are a result of people not understanding animal behavior and wanting to get the job done in a hurry.

Vision:

Cattle have panoramic vision in excess of 300 degrees which means they can see in all directions except for directly behind themselves. In contrast the human's vision is roughly 180 degrees. Approaching cattle from directly behind them can startle them and be dangerous to the handler.

Cattle have poor depth perception. Their ability to perceive ground depth while moving is very limited. Because of this, they have to stop and lower their head to focus. That is the reason unfamiliar objects and shadows on the ground are the cause of animals balking when entering or moving through the chute. Due to the limitation in vertical vision and lack of ability to focus, a shadow on the ground can appear to be a large ditch.

Cattle are sensitive to light differently than humans and move more freely from a dimly illuminated area to a more lighted area providing the light is not glaring in their eyes. This is why it is difficult to get them to move into a dark chute from a sunny outdoor crowding pen. If working cattle at night, frosted lamps need to be used in order to eliminate glare in the cattle's eyes.

Hearing:

Cattle hear differently than humans**.** They can hear both lower volume and higher frequency sounds better than humans but cannot pinpoint the source as well as humans. Loud sounds scare them very easily. Because of their poor depth perception, excessive screaming and hollering can agitate them and cause them to move away

from the source and crash into fences or other objects, including people. Be extremely careful of cattle with sight problems (such as cancer eye) as they rely on hearing to a greater extent and may overreact to sounds.

Flight Zone or Distance:

Just like people, cattle have a comfort zone. Their flight zone is measured by how near you can approach them before they move. When you enter an animal's flight zone, the animal will start to move. If approaching cattle from the front they will turn around and move away from you. If approaching them from the rear, they will turn to look at you and move forward. Depending upon their temperament, the speed at which they move will vary. Wild cattle or those that have had bad experiences with cattle handling will have larger flight zones than docile cattle and not allow a person to get near them before moving. Calmer cattle will allow a person to get closer to them before they start movement.

Familiarity of the cattle with the cattle handler will also affect the size of the flight zone. The cattle will be more apprehensive with persons which they are not familiar.

Herd Instinct:

Cattle are prey animals and feel comfortable and safe in a group. This instinct causes them to want to be in a group and follow other animals movement in that group. Being alone may cause them heightened anxiety, fearfulness and willingness to fight back in a situation that a human might not perceive as dangerous. When an individual is separated from the herd it can become very stressed, agitated and aggressive. When trying to separate an individual from a herd, it is often much easier to allow one or two additional animals to go with that animal.

Maternal Instinct:

Cows have a defensive instinct to protect their young from danger. A cow or heifer's behavior can become very unpredictable at or after calving A docile animal can become aggressive and charge when being separated from their young. A cow is often aggressive just after calving and is not to be trusted. Usually the younger the calf, the more dangerous the mother. Always keep the calf and some barrier between yourself and its mother when ear tagging or any other practice for newborn calves..

Territorial:

Animals are attached to their own territory and are comfortable in that area. Changing environments or location alters their comfort level and can lead to changes in temperament. They may become very tentative when exposed to strange surroundings. Also, in a new environment they sometimes try to re-establish a new pecking order. A single animal moved to a foreign environment may become overly agitated and aggressive. It is best to provide that single animal with a companion animal to overcome stress and excitement.

Bulls:

Bulls react differently to people than cows. Cows are protective of their calves and themselves and when threatened they are usually in the defensive mode. When you retreat the cow will usually do the same and not bother you. Bulls are territorial and are possessive of their space and cows. NEVER TRUST A BULL AND NEVER TURN YOUR BACK TO HIM!. Without warning, a submissive and docile bull may turn aggressive and cause serious injury or death. Never attempt to separate a bull from the herd by yourself. Bulls need to be respected and not necessarily feared. Dairy bulls are more dangerous than beef bulls.

The management system under which bulls are raised has a profound effect on their temperament. Individually reared bulls as calves can become more aggressive toward a person than group reared bull calves because they perceive their handler as rivals and not a dominant power. An innate fear of humans is lost during individual rearing. It is made worse when the calf is teased, played with or constantly rubbed on the head and he views a person as a competitor. When he matures he may want to challenge a person again.

Basic cattle instincts contribute to behavior patterns that are based on actions to make them feel most comfortable in their environment. These behavior patterns or instincts allow cattle to respond to changes in their surroundings or environment. Some of their responses to different situations can be dangerous to both them and the cattle handler. Understanding how and why cattle respond to different situations can greatly reduce the risk of accidents when working with cattle.